

THE TEXAS Observer

ODESSA SYNDROME: Living under a chemical cloud

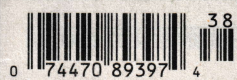
by Greg Harman



Molly Ivins on Dubya's Version of Education Reform

**HIGHTOWER ON BRIBERY • GALBRAITH ON LIVE MIKES • MANDELL ON CAMP DAVID
STEVE KELLMAN ON NEW DOCUMENTARIES • CHRIS GARLOCK ON STEALING TIME**

Robert Jensen on the Dreary State of Contemporary Journalism



BOOK IT

Here is another number to add to your list of statistics (Editorial, "Touchy, Touchy," July 7).

Texas ranks forty-sixth in the United States in per capita support of public libraries. This financial support is borne almost entirely by local communities, resulting in huge inequities of service across the state. Only six states provide no direct assistance from the state level for public libraries, and Texas is the largest of these. In the face of rising costs, communities, even those in large urban areas, experience a constant struggle to find the money to continue to provide adequate library service to their citizens.

Improving the situation has long been a goal of Texas library supporters, Friends of Libraries, and trustees.

State Librarian Peggy Rudd, Director of the State Library and Archives Commission, is trying to change these statistics. She is asking the Legislature to provide funds in direct aid to local public libraries to the tune of \$20 million for each year of the next biennium, to be spent locally on the purchase of new materials or the expansion of existing programs. In this, she is fully supported by the members of her Commission, many of whom were appointed by Governor Bush.

If this request is funded, the Great State would be establishing, for the first time, the principle that some direct support of public libraries is in the interest of the state. This aid would go far toward the goal of providing access to information more evenly to all citizens, especially those who live in the many areas unserved or underserved by public libraries.

Public libraries are a vital part of our educational infrastructure. Since the state has long rec-

ognized its interest in providing funding for local schools, then funding for public libraries is reasonable and proper, as well as urgently needed.

Ruth Semrau
Avinger

WHAT WOULD THOMAS PAINE DO?

It would appear that both the Democratic and Republican parties, not being satisfied with the subsidies corporate America lavishes on them, have now decided that "God" would be a useful ally in their scramble for the pelf that political power will grant them. On August 27, Senator Lieberman told an African-American church audience that Americans "do not have freedom from religion," as if this were not an absolute corollary to the principle of "freedom of religion" enshrined in our federal constitution.

Contrast Lieberman's God-talk and Bush's Jesus-talk with the frank honesty of some of our founding fathers dealing with the subject of religion. Note, for example, how Thomas Jefferson disposes of the Christian myth of the "virgin birth" in this excerpt from an April 11, 1823 letter to John Adams: "And the day will come, when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of the virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

Note how Thomas Paine disposes of the Bible upon which our politicians "swear" when they enter upon the duties of public office: "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon than

the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind." (*The Age of Reason*, Part I).

What contemporary politician would dare quote these words of wisdom by Benjamin Franklin: "The way to see by faith is to shut the eye of reason." (*Poor Richard*, 1758)

Our country was started by giants of political wisdom and intellect. We have devolved into a nation led by mental pygmies motivated only by lust for power and profit.

Robert E. Nordlander
Menasha, Wisconsin

MR. SMITH GOES TO ... ?

The Bush campaign ad attacking Al Gore's character accuses him of presenting different faces to the public. Certainly we can't accuse George W. Bush of reinventing himself. From the beginning, he's been the pampered son of a wealthy family, a frat boy, an upstart who got his daddy's friends to invest in one scheme after another that went bust, but not before the son got out with a profit for himself, a man whose only successful business venture rode the backs of Arlington, Texas, taxpayers — persuaded in an expensive campaign to impose on themselves a hike in their sales tax to build the Texas Rangers' "Ballpark." When the son sold his \$600,000 interest in the Rangers for \$15 million, the taxpayers got none of it. Then, without ever being so much as a precinct chairman in politics, he runs for governor, again on his father's name. Where would he be today, with the name George W. Smith?

Robert Heard
Austin

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A Mind of One's Own

The Chains of "Professional" Employment

BY CHRIS GARLOCK

DISCIPLINED MINDS:

A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives.

By Jeff Schmidt.

Rowman & Littlefield.

293 pages. \$26.95.

"This book is stolen." Jeff Schmidt's provocative opening to his book cost him his job: the ink was barely dry on the pages when Schmidt's employer called him in and summarily dismissed him, barely giving him enough time to pack his personal effects. Schmidt's offense was his forthright admission that *Disciplined Minds* had been written in part on time "stolen" from his employer. "I felt I had no choice but to do it that way," Schmidt writes in his introduction. "Like millions of others who work for a living, I was giving most of my prime time to my employer.... No one was about to hire me to pursue my own vision, especially given my irreverent attitude towards employers."

So Schmidt started spending office time writing *Disciplined Minds*, a book, appropriately, about "professionals, their role in society and the hidden battle over personal identity that rages in professional education and employment." The great strength — and weakness — of *Disciplined Minds* is that it reads like a book written largely on the job: an uncomfortable see-sawing between constant glancing-over-the-shoulder nervousness and a powerful undercurrent of anger and bravado. Like the burned-out co-worker who can't seem to help telling you way more than you ever wanted to know about the latest injustice from the Head Office, Schmidt has gotten hold of a very real problem, and refuses to turn loose until he's laid it out in excruciating detail. Judging by the reaction so far (see sidebar, "Work is Work"), it looks like Schmidt has hit the bull's-eye. But there's also some fairly convincing evidence out there to suggest that larger social forces may well be stirring.

Stockbrokers are doing it. So are lawyers, rocket scientists, and doctors. Joining unions, that is. Maybe not in huge numbers yet, but then the battles in the streets of Flint began years earlier in small shops, as workers began organizing to regain control of their lives on the job. This looming struggle between workers and bosses — which will play out this time in carpeted offices amid the silent hum of air-conditioning — differs only in degree from the bloody strikes, lock-outs, and sit-ins of the last great battles over the American workplace back in the Thirties.

At the same time that blue-collar workers are once more taking to the nation's streets — janitors have blocked traffic in major cities across the nation this year in their increasingly successful quest for justice — many of America's 21 million professionals are beginning to reject the trade-off of a comfortable salary and a cushy desk job for mind-numbing meaningless work. What's going on? Unions have been a shrinking percentage of the workforce for decades now, victims of their own success, as union members ascended to the American middle class and all the middle-management ethos

that implies.

Problem is, the house, the car, and the summer vacation isn't enough any more. Never was, in fact. The battles in Flint (and elsewhere, of course; Flint serves here as a useful flashpoint and metaphor) were much more about workplace control issues — line speed and the right to organize, for example — as they were about wages and hours. "The hidden root of much career dissatisfaction is the professional's lack of control over the 'political' component of his or her creative work," argues Schmidt. Today's professionals, far from being independent, creative "partners," turn out to be just as much cogs in the machine as the blue-collar guy tightening bolts eight soul-numbing hours a day on the assembly line.

To update the metaphor, perhaps a more accurate description of the professional is as micro-processor, buried deep and invisibly in the computer innards, forever relaying instructions. "Professionals sell to their employers more than their ordinary labor power, their ability to carry out instructions," writes Schmidt. "They also sell their ideological labor power, their ability to ex-



▲ On the shop floor, wherever you are

Scott Van Osdol

tend those instructions to new situations.... Professionals implement their employers' attitudes as well as their employer's lists of instructions." In other words, unlike assembly-line workers, who only sell their blood and sweat eight hours a day, today's professionals rent out our brains, twenty-four/seven. We have become, not our own bosses — in the beloved entrepreneurial fantasy — but The Boss Him (or rarely, Her) self.

A paradox, then. Professionals are by definition independent and self-directed. (Else how could they be capable of carrying out high-level tasks such as an employer's attitudes?) Yet to be useful to employers, they must be molded as firmly as the time-and-motion directives for assembly-line workers instruct.

The answer lies in the selection, training, and accreditation of professionals. "The intellectual boot camp known as graduate or professional school, with its cold-blooded expulsions and creeping indoctrination, systematically grinds down the student's spirit and ultimately produces obedient thinkers — highly educated employees who do their assigned work," writes Schmidt, "without questioning its goals." "Professional education is a battle for the very identity of the individual, as is professional employment," he warns, in language that workers of any age of change and discontent would recognize.

Last year, as I was passing out rally leaflets at a downtown Washington Metro stop on a weekday morning, I was stunned at the steady stream of resigned faces pouring up out of the subway. Expressions of exhaustion and frustration that would have been perfectly understandable after a hard day at the office, were simply astonishing to see first thing in the morning. "An unsatisfying work life is much more than a 40-hour-per week problem," Schmidt notes, "because of its profound effect on your morale while you are off the job. You may be pained to think of it as such, but your job is probably the biggest project of your life.... Thus, for all practical purposes, your life's work is at stake."

Workers of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose but your minds. □

Chris Garlock steals time professionally in Washington, D.C.

On June 26, the Maryland Department of Labor issued a ruling rejecting *Physics Today's* claim that author Jeff Schmidt engaged in misconduct on the job by writing *Disciplined Minds* while working at the magazine. The central question was why *Physics Today* fired Schmidt: the company claimed it was because of his "misconduct," while Schmidt says that "management didn't like the radical content of the book, and was looking for an excuse to get rid of me because of my workplace activism." After an investigation, Department of Labor examiner Tasha Owens ruled that Schmidt's work on the book didn't even rise to the level of "simple misconduct," let alone the more serious "gross misconduct" or "aggravated misconduct," and awarded him full benefits, retroactive to June 4, 2000.

A key factor in the decision seems to have been that *Physics Today* never bothered asking Schmidt how much office time he spent writing the book, even though they ostensibly fired him for working on a personal project on company time. "The ruling means that *Physics Today* fired me for a reason other than 'misconduct in connection with the work,'" Schmidt said. "Who will see that reason as anything other than political misconduct?"

Plenty of people, apparently, and not just bosses. Responding to reports on the Schmidt firing in the National Writers Union D.C. local's weekly e-zine (which I edit), writer A. Warren wrote, "In every office I've ever worked in, it would be considered highly unprofessional to do personal work on office time, even if one's assignments were completed. It wouldn't even be tolerated in support staff, let alone writers or other professionals.

"Would Schmidt feel justified in leaving the office for the day whenever he finished his current assignments? I think not. But that's in effect what he did, whenever he worked on his book during office hours. While on company time, he had a moral (and probably legal) obligation to seek out other work-related tasks; that's what he was being paid for. Had he done so, he might have earned better performance reviews than 'satisfactory' and 'above average,' and he'd probably still have his job."

Although these sentiments were echoed in a number of other responses, many others who wrote in to defend Schmidt made the connection with blue-collar work issues explicit. "I can remember years ago my dad telling me about the crane operators that worked on the landfill in Staten Island," wrote Bill. "Their job was to load a certain number of garbage scows every day. The scows were barged out to sea, where the bottom of each one was opened and the garbage dumped to the ocean floor. When the crane men were able to load the set number of scows in less than the eight-hour shift and wanted to go home, my dad was incensed. First, he was angry that these guys thought that they should get a day's pay for fewer hours than it took to do the job. Second, he told them that once it became known that they were being more productive that there would be an expectation that they should produce more. Perhaps management's problem was that if Schmidt could do his job in less time then maybe he could have done more...."

Jim was even more blunt in his critique: "Corporations maintain they are the judge and sole arbiter of how much time each employee must spend on work. Their lackey Congress concedes this right to them. The result is that Americans are working more hours than two decades ago, for less pay. But work time is not theirs to determine. They can ask for what they want, but the amount must be agreed to by negotiation with the workers themselves. The idea that corporations should control this work issue is dehumanizing and abhorrent."

Finally, for an interesting historical footnote on the question of "stealing time" from work, I recently ran across the following in Carl Sagan's *Broca's Brain*:

At the Patent Office, Einstein "soon learned to do his chores more efficiently and this let him snatch precious morsels of time for his own surreptitious calculations, which he guiltily hid in a drawer when footsteps approached." Such were the circumstances attending the birth of the great Relativity Theory.

"In 1905," Sagan continues, "Einstein published four research papers, the product of his spare time at the Swiss Patent Office." The papers, of course, included the famous equation $E = mc^2$ which, among other things, says that although energy and mass can neither be created nor destroyed, one form of energy or matter can be converted into another form.

Or, to put it another way, work is work. — C.G.

Stealing Time A Theory of Relativity